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ROLLING DICE FOR DIVINATION, GAMBLING AND HOMEROMANTEIA

Costanza Salvatore
Athens, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens
(ERC Locus Ludi– Fribourg/CH)

Abstract. Everyday tools such as dice and knucklebones are associated with gambling and divinatory books founded upon the use of Homeric epics. Papyrological documents about this practice date back to Roman Imperial times. Verses drawn from *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were currently assigned to a divinely inspired wisdom. The preface to *Homeromanteia* shows a link with religious and divinatory ideas current at that time (hilastic invocations, hemeromancy, cledonism).

Homeromancy, lot-oracles, hemeromancy, gambling, alea, dice, knucklebones

Περίληψη. Χρηστικά αντικείμενα της καθημερινότητας όπως ζάρια και αστράγαλοι, σχετίζονται με τα τυχερά παιχνίδια καθώς και τα μαντικά βιβλία που βασίζονται στην χρήση των Ομηρικών επών. Παπυρολογικά τεκμήρια γι' αυτήν την πρακτική χρονολογούνται στους ρωμαϊκούς αυτοκρατορικούς χρόνους. Στίχοι ειλημμένοι από την *Ιλιάδα* και την *Οδύσσεια* αποδίδονταν εκείνη την εποχή σε κάποια θεόπνευστη σοφία. Το προοίμιο των Ὁμηρομαντειῶν φανερώνει πως οι τρέχουσες θρησκευτικές και μαγικές αντιλήψεις (ιλαστικές ευχές, ημερομαντεία, κληδονισμός) συνδέονταν μεταξύ τους.

Ομηρομαντεία, κληρομαντεία, ημερομαντεία, τυχερά παιχνίδια, κύβος, ζάρι, αστράγαλοι

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Riassunto. Strumenti ludici correnti quali dadi e astragali sono associati non solo ai giochi di azzardo, ma anche ai prontuari divinatori fondati sulla consultazione dei poemi omerici attestati da testimonianze papirologiche di età imperiale. I versi dell'Iliade e dell'Odissea sono assegnati ad una sapienza veneranda di origine divina. La prefazione degli *Homeromanteia* mostra connessioni con la cultura religiosa e divinatoria contemporanea (invocazioni ilastiche, emeromanzia, cledonismo).

Omeromanzia, *sortes*, emeromanzia, *alea*, dadi, astragali

Ancient Greeks games had a deep religious meaning. This is especially true for games of chance.[1] The contiguity between the sphere of play and religion is materialised by the use of gaming devices to gamble or to draw lots. This paper examines a specific example of such contiguity: the *Homeromanteia* written in Roman Imperial times, in order to analyze dice oracles as a divinatory habit with a special relation to gambling.[2]

The practice of Homeromancy, or rhapsodomancy, was a technique of fortune-telling by using Greek hexametric verses as a reliable source of divination. Epics attributed to Homer were currently considered to be divinely inspired books written by a superhuman figure. Since Hellenistic times, Homer was reputed as a highly revered hero, and he was enshrined in many towns of the Greek-speaking world.[3] In Late Antiquity, sacred texts have always been seen as direct means of communication with the supernatural order. Their 'informative' sense was increased by a 'performative' sense that had a numinous appeal.[4] Christians notoriously

[1] This research is part of the ERC Advanced project "Locus Ludi. The Cultural Fabric of Play and Games in Classical Antiquity" based at the University of Fribourg-CH. This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement # 741520). For board games with dice (*kybeia*) and pawns (*pesseia*), see SCHÄDLER 1999; SCHÄDLER 2013; PARASKEVAÏDIS 1990, 30-38; PARASKEVAÏDIS 1992, 24-29; LAZOS 2002, 368-382, 469-484; COSTANZA 2019a, 186-196; COSTANZA 2020b, 383-387.

[2] For lots which are closely associated with mercantile concerns, see PURCELL 1995, 21; PURCELL 2004, 193; see also VALBELLE – HUSSON 1998, 1065ff.; FRANKFURTER 2005, 246f.; MEERSON 2019, 138f.

[3] See SCHWENDNER 2002, 108; COSTANZA 2009b, 124-125, 144.

[4] See FRANKFURTER 2002, 169; FRANKFURTER 2005, 248.

used Bible quotations for divinatory purposes and Muslims as well through Qūran verses.[5]

The oracle drawn from Homeric verses belong in the category of *sortes* or lot-oracles. The making of everyday decisions was involved by casting lots. The most ancient systems of lots were meant as a series of 'yes' or 'no' answers.[6] Homeromanteia fits in a more complex frame, since an epic verse was randomly read in order to ensure a prophetic answer to the inquirer. All considered, this method was, however, quite easy to perform. It consisted of randomly finding a verse from a previously arranged list and then applying sentences from Homeric epics to the practitioner's circumstances. If the inquirer was not able to master himself procedures required to duly perform dice oracles, he could have asked for assistance from the professionals. In oracular centres, priests were commonly charged to consult such lists of prognostics for visitors of sacred places.[7] As Gregg Schwendner suggested on the grounds of the results of archaeological campaigns led by the University of Michigan in Karanis and Soknopaiou Nesos, bilingual Egyptian priests mastering Demotic as well as Greek were involved in Homeromancy.[8] Bilingual practice is well-known in Late Antique divination, in particular number divination. We may recall a bilingual ostrakon from Medinet Madi (*OMM* 728) concerning isopsephy, that is a technique of adding up numerical values to the letters of the Greek alphabet; in this ostrakon Demotic numeral signs are used instead of Greek letters.[9]

Divining by Homeric verses was also a current spell in Greek magical papyri. For example, a fourth-century compendium of divinatory recipes as *PGM* VII (= *P. Lond.* 121), 1-148 offers a full list of lucky and unlucky days and other divinatory recipes.[10] In the *Homeromanticum corpus*, we cannot find

[5] See BJÖRCK 1939; CANART-PINTAUDI 1984; WIŚNIEWSKI 2016; see VAN DER HORST 2019: 165-170. Still useful FLÜGEL 1860 for Muslim lot-oracles. See also KLINGSHIRN 2002; KLINGSHIRN 2005.

[6] See HEINEVETTER 1912; SCHWENDNER 2002, 109; GRAF 2005, 55-59; MEERSON 2019, 139, 141. For the variety of decisions taken by using lots, see VAN DER HORST 1998, 143.

[7] See KLINGSHIRN 2019, 72-73 for the list of lots-oracles practiced in a large number of oracles, as Iamblichus´ *Hypomnesticon* mentions with respect to little pebbles and stones.

[8] See SCHWENDNER 2002, 110.

[9] See MENCHETTI – PINTAUDI 2008, 107, 111; LOUGOVAYA 2011, 203; COSTANZA 2020c, 197-201.

[10] Among Homeromantic papyri, PGM VII preserves a relevant treatise, see MALTOMINI 1995.

exact correspondences between verses countermarked by the same numbers and prophecies assigned to them. Therefore, prognostics go back to different streams of textual tradition. Indeed, similarities are undeniable, as a preface preserved in the fullest form in an Oxyrhynchus fragment (*P. Oxy*. LVI 3831) published by Peter Parsons confirms.[11] The invocation to Apollo is also attested in *PGM* VII and it was probably counted in *P. Bon*. 3.[12]

Given the strong influence of Hellenic culture to Graeco-Egyptian milieu, many *Homeromanteia* are preserved in papyri of the 2nd and 3rd centuries. This evidences the high degree of literacy in Roman imperial times. In general, papyri offer selected verses from both epics;[13] sometimes, verses are quoted only from the *Odyssey*.[14]

The Homeromantic preface given in *P. Oxy*. LVI 3831 is worthy of further examination. It is matter of a detailed introduction. Instructions are given to the users. We may remark that these handbooks on Homeromancy were conceived for didactic purposes. They were compiled to be read by everyone who was interested in this subject. Didactic ends are usual in the realm of divination. Papyri about hieroscopy, that is divination by examining the entrails of sacrificial victims, also give full instruction about how to perform this technique.[15] The preface to Homeromantic texts can be read in *P. Oxy*. LVI 3831, ll. 1-21:

πρῶτο(ν) μ(ὲν) εἰδέναι σε δεῖ τὰς ἡμέρας αἷς [
χρῆσθαι τῶι μαντ(είωι) β΄ εὐχόμ(εν)ο(ν) τ(ὴν) ἐπωιδ[ὴν
εἰπεῖν τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ εὔξασθαι ἐν σεαυτῶι πρ .[
ἃ βούλει. Τρίτο(ν) λαβόντα τὸ(ν) κύβ(ον) ἀ(πο)ρίψαι τρ[ὶς
καὶ ἀ(πο)ρίψαντα πρ(ὸς) τὸ(ν) ἀριθμὸ(ν) τ(ῶν) τριῶν τ. [

Κλῦθι, ἄναξ, ὅς που Λυκ(ίης) ἐν πίον(ι) δήμωι / ε(ἶς) ἢ ἐ[ν]ὶ
Τροί[η]ι· δύνασαι δὲ σὺ πάντοσ’ ἀκούειν / ἀνέρι
κηδομένωι, ὡ[ς ν]ῦν ἐμὲ κῆδος ἱκάνει
καί μοι τοῦτ’ ἀγόρευσον ἐτήτυμ(ον), ὄφρ’ ἐῦ εἰδῶ

[11] See PARSONS 1989.

[12] See MONTEVECCHI 1953.

[13] *P. Bon*. I 3, 2nd-3rd c., see BINGEN 1961, 219; MALTOMINI 1991, 239ff.

[14] *P. Oxy*. IV 773, 2nd c.; *P. Brux. inv*. E 5938, edited again by LAMEERE 1960, 113-47, no. 7; see BINGEN 1961, 219. It presents seven fragments from four columns containing Hom., *Od.* 2.304-312, 339-57, 362-74, 386-410 and more neglected bribes.

[15] See COSTANZA 2015, 175-181; COSTANZA 2016, 435-439; FURLEY – GYSEMBERGH 2015, 2-22.

ὅτ(τι) μάλιστα ἐθέλω καί μοι φίλο(ν) ἔπλετο θυμῶι·

αἷς δεῖ ἡμέραις α΄ ὅλ(ην) ἡμέραν β΄ μεσούσης
γ΄ μὴ χρῶ δ΄ ἀπ᾽ ἠοῦς ε΄ μὴ χρῶ ς ὅλ(ην)
ζ΄ πρωὶ καὶ δείλης η΄ μεσο(ύσης) θ΄ μὴ χρῶ
ι΄ μὴ χρῶ ια΄ πρωί ιβ΄πρωί ιγ΄ ὅλ(ην) ἡμέ(ραν)
ιδ΄ ὅλ(ην) ιε΄πρωί ις΄ πρωὶ καὶ δείλης
ιζ΄ ἀπ᾽ ἠοῦς ιη΄ μὴ χρῶ ιθ΄ ἀπ᾽ ἠοῦς
κ΄ πρωὶ καὶ μεσούσης <κα΄ ...> κβ΄ ὁμ(οίως) κγ΄ πρωί κδ΄ ἀπ᾽ ἠοῦς
κε΄ μὴ χρῶ κς΄ ὅλ(ην) ἡμέ(ραν) κζ΄ μεσούσης ἡμέρας
κη΄ πρωὶ καὶ δείλης κθ΄ μὴ χρῶ λ΄ ἀπ᾽ ἠοῦς

Ὁμή(ρου) μαντ(εῖον) ἢ ἀκινάκης

ll. 6-11 = *PGM* VII (*P. Lond.* 121), ll. 1-5

Firstly, you should know at which days you may use this oracle. Secondly, you must pray and say this prayer for the god for whatever you want. Thirdly, once you have taken the die, you must throw it three times and throw it for the number of three ciphers.

«Answer me, Lord, who rule the fertile valley of Lycia, in which lay Troy. Thou might always listen to someone in trouble, such as a great trouble burdens me and tell me this promptly so that I know very well what I especially want to know and what is dear to my heart».

In the following days you must perform the oracle: the 1st day of the month all the day, the 2nd at noon, the 3rd not at all, the 4th from dawn, the 5th not at all, the 6th all the day, the 7th in the morning and in the evening, the 8th at noon, the 9th not at all, the 10th not at all, the 11th and 12th in the morning, the 13th and 14th all the day, the 15th in the morning, the 16th in the morning and in the evening, the 17th from dawn, the 18th not at all, the 19th from dawn, the 20th in the morning and at noon, <the 21st ...>, the 22nd the same, the 23rd in the morning, the 24th from dawn, the 25th not at all, the 26th all

> the day, the 27th at noon, the 28th in the morning and in the evening, the 29th not at all, the 30th from dawn.
>
> Homeromanteion or "little sword".

At the end (l. 21), this handbook is explicitly quoted as a *Homeromanteion* or *akinakes* (Greek ἀκινάκης from Old Persian **akinaka*^{h}). This term means a short Persian style sword, a kind of dagger worn at the belt, which was part of the standard equipment of Median and Parthian guards and then of Greek Hellenistic and Roman armies till Middle Byzantine period.[16]

The statement as oracle of Homer identifies the matter of this spell without any doubt, while the word *akinakes* borrowed from Persian expresses a metaphor relating to the agency of this procedure, its power and its keenness like a sword. Greek divination usually refers to exotic milieu and especially to the East, the homeland of all sort of magic practice and hidden lore in the eyes of ancient Greeks and Byzantines. In this respect, it is very significant to have divinatory recipes and lot-books ascribed to the Persian Magician Astrampsychos (literally 'Star Soul')[17] or *compendia* assigned to Persian wisdom.[18]

At ll. 1-5, it is preliminarily stated that inquirers should know favourable times, which are propitious to perform this oracle. This is a major rule in occult sciences. A full list of hemeromancy, the art of determining good and bad days, is given in *PGM* VII. At ll. 12-20, the author of the homeromantic preface summarizes lucky and unlucky days. Some days are wholly unfavourable. Other times, it is better to consult the oracle just in the morning or in the evening, or else only at noon. Just a few days are unfavourable with any restriction. Here, the author of this compendium

[16] Cf. D'AMATO 2012, 65.

[17] See the oneiromantic recipe in *PGM* VIII and the *Sortes Astrampsychi*, cf. STEWART 1995; STEWART 2001, XI, XLII; NAETHER 2010, 87-88; LUIJENDIJK – KLINGSHIRN 2019, 28-31.

[18] See the *Book of Wisdom, Palmomancy of Persians*, Βίβλος σοφίας. Περσῶν Παλμική, from Athen. Ms. EBE 1493, 13th c., edited by COSTANZA 2007, 606-617, cf. COSTANZA 2009a, 199-201; COSTANZA 2012, 777; VÍTEK 2006, 264. Persian science and pseudosciences was a pervasive phenomenon in Constantinople since 12th century, and still more in Palaiologan times, see MAGDALINO 2006, 104, 148; MAVROUDI 2006, 56, 66.

amounts, as usually, the Egyptian month of 30 days based upon three decades.[19]

At ll. 4-5, the writer explicitly asserts that the inquirer should roll a six-sided cube three times, in order to find three ciphers countermarking the verse containing the prophetic answer to his question. In *PGM* VII, quoted verses are marked by a number of three ciphers written on the left. Homeric verses are arranged from α (= 1) to ϛ (= 6), so that every possible combination performed by rolling dice three times ($6^3 = 216$ verses) was included.[20] Consulters acted by rolling dice three different times:[21] they belonged to a wider audience than learned reading public and used Homeric verses as performative words.[22] Subsequently, *Homeromanteia* fall under the remit of cybomancy, divination by dice.

Early epic tradition provides a tool of communication with the divine through playful objects of very common use, such as dice. Ancient sources commonly assign the invention of these tools to Palamedes, a culture hero reputed for his cleverness who changed the world through many useful discoveries. The dedication of Palamedes' invention to the sanctuary of Tychê probably refers to an oracular function.[23] Other lot-oracles were based on rolling four-sided knucklebones (Greek ἀστράγαλοι, Latin *tali*) – or probably their imitations in bronze, wood, or ivory –[24] as lots, in order to forecast the future.[25] This is the case of an alphabet oracle from Adada in

[19] On hemerologia in *P. Oxy*. LVI 3831, see NAETHER 2010, 87, 330; in the *Sortes Astrampsychi*, *ibid*., 86.

[20] See instructions given in Introduction at *P. Oxy*. LVI 3831, ll. 1-6; see MALTOMINI 1995, 107.

[21] *PGM* VII 1-152, 3rd c.; see HOPFNER 1924, 213; HOPFNER 1928b, 1286; MALTOMINI 1995, 107-22; SCHWENDNER 2002, 109.

[22] See KARANIKA 2011, 255-256; ARCARI 2019, 68-69.

[23] See Paus., 2.20,3-4: πέραν δὲ τοῦ Νεμείου Διὸς Τύχης ἐστὶν ἐκ παλαιοτάτου ναός, εἰ δὴ Παλαμήδης | κύβους εὑρὼν ἀνέθηκεν ἐς τοῦτον τὸν ναόν, MADDOLI – SALADINO 1982, 368; COSTANZA 2020a, 38-39.

[24] On the controversial use of astragali replicas, see CARÈ 2019. For games of knucklebones, see SCHÄDLER 1996; LAZOS 2002, 174-198; COSTANZA 2019a, 197-209; COSTANZA 2020b, 387-389.

[25] Knucklebones were also used as random generators in a well-spread method of divining the future and they commonly appear in funerary context, see PARASKEVAÏDIS 1989, 88-92; HÜBNER 1992, 48-51; GRAF 2005, 60; CARBONE 2005, 405; CARÈ 2006; CARÈ 2010; CARÈ 2012; CARÈ 2013; NOLLÉ 2007, 7-17; COSTANZA 2018, 67-78. On Palamedes' inventions such as dice, pawns, weights and measures, see GERA 2003, 112-181; DEBIASI 2004, 120; FAVREAU-LINDER 2015; COSTANZA 2020a, 37-44.

Pisidia (Asia Minor), where the user had to roll a knucklebone five times, in order to find the answer to his fate, that is, a verse inscribed next to the combination of values obtained by his throws.[26]

At l. 2ff., the compiler directs the user to pray the god. At l. 6ff., the deity, whose favor should be invoked, is Apollo Lycian. This seems quite obvious because he is the patron of the region of Troy, where fatal events happened that inspired Homeric rhapsodies, since these epics are the source of present oracle.

Hilastic, that is propitiatory, prayers are a key topic of divinatory methods, such as palmomancy, the art of interpreting involuntary movements of the human body, such as quivers, tremors and spasms.[27] In palmomantic papyri, the inquirer was directed by regular prescriptions to ask some 'pagan' deity for its goodwill. As in this oracle, supplications were prescribed in order to call for the god's help as well as to guarantee the fulfilling of prophecies.[28] Prayers to gods were currently associated to throws of cubic, six-sided dice: the rules were overlying dice-throws and prayers to gods seem to be different from those commonly used in astragalomantic texts.[29]

PGM VII mentions a prayer to "Hermes, Bringer of gains to the Merchants" (*Hermês Kerdémporos*). This confirms the close association between drawing *sortes* by rolling dice and the character of trade which was ordained by fate.[30] We cannot forget how individuals at risk in daily life very gladly attempt to tame the most unpredictable effects of fate by rolling dice or by some other divinatory habit. It is, obviously, question of relation of lot-oracles with mercantile concern and perils of financial loss. Moreover, the divine protector of merchants (and thieves) was no other than the younger brother of the main Lord of divination, Apollo. Notoriously, he received the mastership on minor typology of divining by lots from his elder

[26] See NOLLÉ 2007, 62 and 138; MEERSON 2019, 139.

[27] See COSTANZA 2009a, 6, 33-35; COSTANZA 2019b, 78-86.

[28] See COSTANZA 2019b, 91-92.

[29] On standards of associating deities to dice throws, see GRAF 2005, 63-64.

[30] For links between lot-oracles and fate, see PURCELL 1995, 21; COSTANZA 2004, 192; GRAF 2005, 65, 77, with mention of this prayer to "Hermes, Bringer of gains to the Merchants" (*Hermês Kerdémporos*).

brother. As a trickster, Hermes is the patron god of every form of divination countermarked by a decisive component in fate, *alea*, and gamble.[31]

Post-Byzantine evidence is also available on this subject. A treatise very similar to ancient practice, as we know by Graeco-Aegyptian papyri, is edited by Odysseas Lampsidou. In this case, the user is equally directed to roll three dice, but his enquiry is associated with Psalm verses, instead of Homeric verses,[32] as it usually happens in this period. Otherwise, Psalms offered lot-oracles since Late Antiquity, as papyrogical evidence clearly shows.[33] Moreover, this late handbook proves the long-dating attractiveness of rolling dice for divinatory purposes. Humans always want to foretell their fate. If such an easy chance was at hand, why not try by rolling dice?

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[31] See GROTTANELLI 2001, 129-137; GROTTANELLI 2005, 129-142; BURKERT 2005, 37; NAETHER 2010, 330; JAILLARD 2012.

[32] See LAMPSIDOU 1941, 187-94, with edition of a cybomantic book attested by a middle 18th century's manuscript.

[33] As it is well-known for Psalm 90, a text of supplication, see LA'DA CSABA – PAPATHOMAS 2004; KRAUS 2005; KRAUS 2006; KRAUS 2007; KRAUS 2014. Generally, for magical use of Palms, see VAN DER HORST 2019, 156f.

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